

MA RAINEY'S



BLACK BOTTOM

YAZOO 1071

MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM



1. OH PAPA BLUES
2. BLACK EYE BLUES - take 1
3. "MA" RAINEY'S BLACK
BOTTOM
4. BOOZE AND BLUES
5. BLUES OH BLUES
6. SLEEP TALKING
BLUES - take 1
7. LUCKY ROCK BLUES
8. GEORGIA CAKE WALK
9. DON'T FISH IN MY SEA
10. STACK O' LEE BLUES
11. SHAVE 'EM DRY BLUES
12. YONDER COME THE
BLUES -take 1
13. SCREECH OWL BLUES
14. FAREWELL DADDY
BLUES

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When Ma Rainey was in her heyday, black vocalists had no legitimate performing outlet other than segregated vaudeville theatres and minstrel shows. Whatever these had been in the nineteenth century, they had become debased by the 1920s, thanks to the emphasis theatre operators (and possibly the audience) placed on the glamorous looks and garish costumes of the performers. "Flash was half your show," recalled one showman of the era.

The singers who headlined the theatres generally did their best to mimic the sultry airs of chorus girls, as J. Mayo Williams discovered when he became recording director of Paramount's "race" series (the industry designation for black music) in 1923. Unlike the fictional record producer in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, Williams was black; the first such figure in the recording industry.

Williams was dismayed by the fact that many of the leading theatre attractions he auditioned were not only poor vocalists, but also had no concept of recording. They would actually shake and dance in the studio, as though performing before a camera. Generally, the better-looking the singer, the weaker her voice was.

In December of 1923, Williams paid a visit to Chicago's seedy Monogram Theatre at 35th and State Street in search of talent. "Nothin' but the low-life ever went to the *Monogram*," he later recalled. "The upper crust went to the *Grand*." There he discovered Ma Rainey, who was also billed as "Madam" Rainey.

A gauge of Rainey's relative obscurity is the fact that her Monogram engagement passed unnoticed in *The Chicago Defender*, which chronicled the doings of black entertainers. An ugly duckling of the theatre scene, she had built a career largely on the basis of pure vocal prowess. Presented by Williams, she became the last of the black vaudeville singers to make a recording success. Her recording popularity in her genre was surpassed only by Bessie Smith.

Rainey capitalized on her recording fame to enliven her stage shows, which included her dancing and comedy as well as singing. The stage would display what appeared to be a large cabinet phonograph, playing one of Rainey's records. During the song she would emerge from the cabinet.

Sixty years later, one is still impressed by Ma Rainey's unaffected, somber vocal delivery. She tapped only her natural vocal resources. Her records give credence to the numerous legends that she was Bessie Smith's musical godmother: though Rainey

lacked the heavy vibrato of Bessie Smith, the two had an otherwise identical vocal style. This kinship does not necessarily mean that Ma Rainey actively "taught" Bessie Smith anything; thanks to their similar registers, the latter had only to listen casually to Rainey to absorb her unceremonious approach.

Ma Rainey's own background is largely obscure. A native of Columbus, Georgia, she was born Gertrude Pridgett in 1886 and is said to have entered black show business around the turn of the century. She once claimed to have heard blues material while performing in a Missouri tent show in 1902, and to have afterwards coined the term "blues" and popularized the form. This boast probably stemmed from pride in her Paramount billing as *Mother of the Blues*, a claim that Williams (perhaps inspired by her nickname "Ma") made on her behalf without concerning himself with her professional past.

The minstrel troupe she headed up with her husband "Pa" (a comedian who performed with a saucer stuffed inside his mouth) traveled all over the country, even visiting the headquarters of Paramount Records in Port Washington, Wisconsin.

The tunes Rainey and her female colleagues recorded have since come to be called "classic" blues, a nonsensical term devised by jazz enthusiasts. In reality they are black vaudeville blues; there is nothing "classic" about them. No one knows how they originated. It is likely that the earliest black vaudeville singers sang straightforward 12 bar blues, and began to garnish their tunes with pop-style introductions and more ambitious orchestration after W. C. Handy mated barrelhouse blues with Tin Pan Alley music in such pieces as *St. Louis Blues* (1914). It was Handy's aim to thereby make blues palatable to white listeners. Though he created a sophisticated mode of blues in the process, the Tin Pan Alley trimmings of vaudeville blues are generally undistinguished. As opposed to Handy's hopes, the voices of the exceptional singers such as Ma Rainey are more memorable than their "classic" material.

Because the vaudeville singers frequently used studio accompanists and were fed material by a variety of songwriters, their records bear only a moot resemblance to their live performances. By comparison, Ma Rainey's records generally have the authentic flavor of live music. Her recording bands have real character, and blend exceptionally well with her singing. In retrospect it is apparent that many vaudeville blues singers needed bloated band accompaniments to support flimsy voices. The

power of Rainey's singing was such that she was able to succeed even with a pair of country-style guitars behind her, as on *Shave 'Em Dry*.

Of all vaudeville blues singers, she stayed the closest to the strict blues idiom, frequently recording unadorned 12 bar tunes. Her recorded repertoire was also unusual in its emphasis on familiar blues standards, or what Williams mistakenly called "the Handy blues." Many of her tunes were self-composed, another anomaly of the era. According to Williams, she would enter the studio with a sheet of ideograms; unable to read or write, she would glean the lyrics from pictures she drew to illustrate her songs.

Unlike the tempestuous Bessie Smith, Rainey had a low-key, professional demeanor. She was the only blues singer Williams handled who never drank. "Ma Rainey was a shrewd businessman," Williams added. "We never tried to put any swindles over on her."

Rainey's recording career was waning commercially when it ended in 1928. According to Art Laibly, who succeeded Williams as Paramount recording director, she stopped recording because she decided to retire from show business. When she died ten years later of heart disease she was listed by the state of Georgia as a "housekeeper."



“Ma” Rainey

FROM the Bottoms of Georgia came the mother of the blues, the Gold Neck Mama of Stageland—Ma Rainey. From earliest childhood — Gertrude Rainey felt that the blues were expressive of the heart of the south, and the sad hearted people who toiled from sun-up to sundown — crooning weird tunes to lighten their labors. She took up the stage, as a profession — making friends, and gaining popularity, —not for a moment losing sight of her life ambition — to bring to the north, the beautiful melodies of the south — and a better understanding of the sorrow filled hearts of its people. After many years of appearing in theatres of the south, Ma Rainey went to New York—astounding and bewildering the northerners with what they called “queer music.” She left, and still they did not understand. After a while, they began to hear more and more of the delightful music sung as only Ma Rainey can sing it—and gradually they began to love this type of music as she did. Ma Rainey taught many blues singers who are so popular today.— and is looked up to and worshipped as the true mother of the blues by all of her large following.

1. OH PAPA BLUES (1927) 7
2. BLACK EYE BLUES - take 1 (1928) 6
3. "MA" RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM (1927) 1
4. BOOZE AND BLUES (1924) 3
5. BLUES OH BLUES (1927) 7
6. SLEEP TALKING BLUES - take 1 (1928) 6
7. LUCKY ROCK BLUES (1924) 9
8. GEORGIA CAKE WALK (1927) 1
9. DON'T FISH IN MY SEA (1926) 2
10. STACK O' LEE BLUES (1926) 5
11. SHAVE 'EM DRY BLUES (1924) 4
12. YONDER COME THE BLUES - take 1 (1926) 5
13. SCREECH OWL BLUES (1928) 8
14. FAREWELL DADDY BLUES (1924) 4

1. Prob. Shirley Clay, cornet; prob. Al Wynn, trombone; poss. Artie Starks, clarinet; unknown piano and drums.
2. Jimmy Blythe, piano.
3. Howard Scott, cornet; Charlie Green, trombone; Don Redman, clarinet; Fletcher Henderson, piano; Kaiser Marshall, drums.
4. Miles Pruitt, 12 string guitar, unknown second guitar.
5. Joe Smith, cornet; Charlie Green, trombone; Buster Bailey, clarinet; Coleman Hawkins, bass sax; Fletcher Henderson, piano; Charlie Dixon, banjo.
6. Georgia Tom Dorsey, piano; Tampa Red, guitar.
7. Shirley Clay, cornet; Kid Ory, trombone; Claude Hopkins, piano; unknown banjo and tuba.
8. Poss. Georgia Tom Dorsey, piano.
9. Tommy Ladnier, cornet; Jimmy O'Bryant, clarinet; ? Harris, alto/tenor sax; Lovie Austin, piano.

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